

## Music As Method: Experimenting With Co-Creating Music as Knowledge Production on Urban Waterscapes in Ghana

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses co-creating music as knowledge production in water research in Ghana. By bringing together an established Ghanaian highlife band and community musicians from the study area, we were interested in generating knowledge from alternative epistemologies or vantage points. The experiment included a song writing and open mic session in which the musicians engaged with community members to reflect on their experiences with water access together. In this way, the artists, rather than the researchers, acted as ethnographers. The final product of the experiment was a song (entitled *Nsu Pa* (Clean Water)) accompanied by a music video. One of the insights of the experiment was that musicians were able to straddle different knowledge registers, and in this way encompass both practical and metaphysical aspects of the importance of water. This also shows that when musicians work as ethnographers, they move easily between focusing on people's experiences and thinking in terms of concrete solutions to the challenges they encountered. Moreover, oral traditions in Ghana (proverbs and music for instance) enable artists to convey criticism and political tense questions in an implicit way, which can facilitate community debates about water challenges.

**Keywords:** Music; co-creation; water knowledge; waterscapes.

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### INTRODUCTION

What forms of knowledge about water use and water experiences can the co-creation of music generate? What registers of knowledge does music draw on? And how does this knowledge situate itself in a research field that is closely linked to policy? This article discusses an experiment with music co-creation as part of a larger research project on urban waterscapes in Ghana. The goal was to explore music co-writing and composition on the topic of water through engagement with the perspectives of the community members themselves. Driven by a creative and artistic curiosity, we explored what musicians as ethnographers for community research would produce and how that would supplement knowledge generated through conventional social science qualitative methods.

State-of-the-art research in water studies establishes that water injustice such as unequitable availability and access to water is one of the major challenges in many urban contexts in Africa and beyond (Castelli et al, 2025, Cleaver et al, 2021). Climate change, increasing urbanisation, and pollution lead to growing pressure on water resources and water infrastructure (Takyi et al, 2022).

Addressing these challenges requires new ways of knowing about water experiences that integrate social, political, technical and natural aspects. One way of doing

this has been to include various stakeholders in the co-creation of water knowledge and through this attempt to overcome exclusion embedded in social and political hierarchies (Castelli et al, 2025). Adding to this, we explore what different registers of water knowledge are created through music and sound.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of waterscapes investigates the relationship between actors, institutions, and governance in understanding how people get access to water. This concept recognises the variation, inequalities and social power involved in water access and distribution (Loftus, 2007, Flaminio et al, 2022). This literature also acknowledges that the uneven and fragmented provision of water does not match the modern infrastructural ideas of the planned, networked and engineered city that guides current policy frameworks (MacAfee, 2023). Co-creation has been applied as a concept and process in urban water management, hydrology and the broader climate change literatures to integrate community perspectives and needs and to identify user driven innovative solutions (Wehbe et al, 2024, Ziervogel et al, 2022, Castelli et al, 2025). The aim is, among other things, to strengthen capacity and to enhance the implementation of policies. The broader co-creation



literature, that covers both the public and private sectors, emphasises inclusion, ownership and value creation. Newer literature investigates the democratic quality of co-creation focusing on collaboration, legitimacy and the distribution of power among other factors (Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing, 2024).

In a recent call for transformative research collaboration with Africa, Aboderin *et al* (2023) calls for collaboration that includes a “*two-way* capacity strengthening and (un)learning” (Aboderin *et al*, 2023: 214) that allows us to focus both on co-creation as a way to enhance water justice and availability, and as a way to reflect critically on how knowledge is produced. Important in this is attention to unevenness at the epistemic level in which the assumed universalism of Western concepts and policy ideas can be challenged. This is highly relevant in the field of water research, in which a more epistemological plural and inclusive approach can bring existential and symbolic meanings of water to the fore and supplement the more technical and infrastructural aspects that are normally considered in policy work.

We use music in co-creating water knowledge as a way to open up the epistemological field. Water appears in oral storytelling, myths, songs and narratives that for instance highlight the relationship between humans, nature and the spiritual world; relationships that are often not taken into consideration in literature focusing on water management and governance. We draw from the communicative tradition and potential that music has in a Ghanaian context, as well as more broadly. Traditions such as palmwine music and guitar highlife music have served the role of addressing topics that were of concern and importance to communities. More recently, ‘artivism’ as a genre is used to draw public attention to topics such as political corruption and illegal mining (Brew, 2024). Music as a form of communication, knowledge creation and sharing is intellectual and emotional at the same time and therefore able to engage listeners with multiple registers than more conventional forms of science communication. This allows different categories of people to be involved (such as musicians) that are often not considered as people holding relevant knowledge or expertise in work and collaboration around water.

Music and sound have been described by anthropologists as a way of knowing the world. It can be a way of talking about things that are otherwise difficult to talk about, but it can also be a way to know about something in a different language; a language that is performed differently through music than in other knowledge fields. We draw inspiration from Steven Feld’s work on acoustemology, who argues that knowing the world is closely linked to “the cultivated habits of how you perform it, talk about it and make it conspicuous, that is make it public, make it available” (Rice and Feld, 2021: 127). Water is talked about differently in different spheres and we are interested in

including a sphere that is not pre-designed to a policy field or influenced by particular academic perspectives.

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## METHOD AND DATA

Our experimenting with music as method was part of a larger interdisciplinary research project called ‘Multiple Waterscapes in Urban Ghana’ that is a collaborative research project between universities in Ghana and Europe. The overall aim of the project is to investigate how urban residents in Kumasi, Ghana’s second biggest city, get access to water in a context of climate change and a context of fragmented infrastructural service delivery. Urban residents rely on different sources when they access water, and we explore what this variation means for the reliability and quality of the water provided.

Through the science engagement component of the project, we were interested in using music as a way to communicate environmental questions and people’s everyday experiences, but also as a way to capture deeper histories and narratives, and shared concerns within Ghanaian society that are discussed in public debate and popular culture through a shared language such as music.

We first organised an open mic and song writing workshop in Kumasi in October 2025 where we brought together a Ghanaian highlife band (Amamere) and six musicians from the study community. The six community musicians who responded to the call for the workshop work in genres such as Afrobeat, Dancehall, Reggae and some are developing their own voice by combining multiple genres. Some of the community musicians record and produce their own songs. The difference in musical genres was bridged by the shared community concern and the weight of the subject matter. The event took place in a bar located in the research site that is run by a person who also serves as manager of several young artists from the community. In preparation, several visits to the site took place, for instance to secure permission to hold the event from the police and the chief of the area.

Amamere band created the basic melody and chorus for the song. Their choice was to make a reggae genre song based on the idea that reggae would have global appeal. At the same time, it was a way to accommodate the multiple musical genres represented by the artists. While we acknowledge that highlife and palmwine are culturally embedded music forms, the contemporary music scene in Ghana manifests multiple genres also when it comes to conveying social and environmental concerns through music.

The chorus of the song *Nsu Pa* (Clean Water) was made on the basis of conversations between the band leader and the PI of the research project in which the general theme, context and initial findings of the research project were shared. When discussing the making of the chorus and the initial work with the lyrics, the band

members had some themes that they thought paramount to include such as the question of illegal mining (known as *galamsey* in Ghana) and the broader plea to get access to clean water. In this way, the initial work with the song (the making of the chorus) consisted of both insights from the thematic focus of the research project as well as the composer's and band members own reflections on water challenges and in particular where the two perspectives overlapped. Although all of the musicians were not from the communities where the research itself took place, they shared similar experiences and concerns about the pollution of the water bodies in Ghana. Bringing these experiences together served as a way to connect to broader experiences and concerns of Ghanaian society that go beyond the communities that are part of the research project. During the workshop, we encouraged co-created song writing from personal and acquired (from field work on the site conducted as part of the workshop) experiences with water in the community.

The data used for this article consists of videos, photographs and notes from the different events that were part of the music co-creation, lyrics from the song writing workshop (the musicians' fieldnotes), as well as observations and discussions from later events where the work with the song was presented by the researchers and performed by the band. We interviewed some musicians after the workshop and have discussed our analytical findings with some of the band members in the process of writing. In the analysis we were in particular looking at the process through which the musicians created knowledge: What did they ask about? What did they report back afterwards? What did they include in their song? And what recurrent themes emerged?

Regarding ethics in co-producing the song, we have considered and included a broad range of actors in crediting and compensation; composers, lyricists, musicians, researchers, facilitators, collaborators and funders. First, all musicians (including those who did not appear in the final song) were compensated financially. Those who contributed directly to the song are credited (both in the music video and in the song title). We have insisted on featuring the musicians by name, rather than as people appearing under the broad category 'Ghanaian musicians' as we have experienced this tendency in the development sector, and which can appear as a form of 'tokenism' rather than appreciation of artistic work on its own terms. The PI of the project and the composer of the song (and leader of Amamere band) hold the rights of the song and will ensure that any income from the song will be distributed to those who contributed. The participants of the workshop, as well as the community members engaged during fieldwork, were informed about the aim of the project and that the final goal was to produce a song and a music video. They provided oral consent for this. The inclusion of lyrics and singing that became part of the final version of the song was at the end an artistic

decision taken by the composer of the song Rim Akandoh Jnr.

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## RESULTS

The call to participate was an open call with no probes for problem solution but was rather presented as an invitation to collect stories and experiences with water and questions and concerns that matter to people. All musicians undertook fieldwork in the community as part of the workshop (see Figure 1). They went in groups consisting of artists from the area with members of the band, who did not reside there. They engaged with people they already knew and those they had not interacted with before. This agency given to the musicians proved to be enlightening for them (and for us) as they had not engaged with their community at that level before. Drawing on ethnographic approaches by taking notes, participatory observations and audio and video recordings, they interviewed and collected data from around 10 community actors for each group.

When they reassembled to discuss their experiences from the field, and to put together ideas for the song, each musician had become a quasi-ethnographer or quasi-researcher. And at the end of the discussion, they all drew from a common thread of concern from the field namely clean water. From their individual lyrics, the theme of water accessibility and protection were dominant. The service of water for drinking was profoundly preeminent and its accompanying domestic usage.

One particular aim with our experiment was to include people who are not considered experts or key actors / stakeholders in the field. By including musicians, who in some cases were also residents in the area (and in some cases not), we aimed at working with people who were outside of the group of immediate water related stakeholders (for example members of water user associations, local assembly members, chiefs, private water sellers, representatives of Ghana Water company etc.). We included a group of people that relate to their communities and their concerns in a different way. They are not directly involved in service provision or decision making but see themselves as members of the communities and use their experiences to reflect community concerns in their artistic work. They feature as alternative experts in their community and as communicators of social concerns that are also linked to existential and spiritual dimensions of understanding water. One example of this is the opening phrases of the song:

*Obɔ adee na ɔbɔ nsuo* (The creator created water)  
*Nipa bia hia nsuo* (All humans need water)

These phrases illustrate the underlying understanding of water in the rest of the song, namely that water is sacred and that all humans depend on it irrespective of

who you are or where you are from. The opening phrases of the song were brought in by the community artist (Billy Manin), who features in the final song. This spiritual understanding of water was later in the song linked to the importance of water in everyday life: 'If you wanna cook, *mame* [give me] water. If you wanna wash, *mame* [give me] water'. Interestingly, '*mame* water' can be understood in different ways in the oral version of the song: It means 'give me water', but it can also be understood as a reference to the water spirit Mami Wata, or be a reference to the important role of women in water labour (*Maame* being a reference to mothers in Ghana).

During the song writing part of the workshop (see Figure 2), we were interested in looking at what kind of knowledge can go into a song. This was both an individual and a collective process. We had a joint discussion where everyone shared their experiences and then the community artists sat for some time on their own and wrote their songs on their phones and later started to practice side by side. This showed an awareness to a collective understanding of water experiences, but also a clear openness to learning from the community. This openness was related to a sense of attachment to the community both by those living there and those coming from elsewhere. The knowledge about water experience (that later became part of the song) was co-created in that particular meeting and in the connection between the musicians and the community (both in a concrete sense and in a metaphorical sense). They expressed that the knowledge they gained from the community served as inspiration for the song writing. In the final song, it was the individual singers (four people were singing changing between Twi, Fante, Pidgin, English and Hausa) who in a semi-spontaneous way composed the lyrics of their part of the song while they sang in the studio (except the chorus).

The artists suggested concrete solutions during the workshop that directly aimed at solving concrete problems that had been discussed with community members during fieldwork. They were not levelled at policy actors and institutions, and they were not 'wrapped' in policy or academic lingo. One example of this was the suggestion to establish more boreholes because many community members preferred borehole water over piped water (see Figure 3). Another example was the self-reflection about wasting water. The young artists proposed that they should learn more from the older generation and encourage conversations on the topic with their peers.

Furthermore, water presence in the community was mentioned, and not only the issue of availability of drinking water. A recurrent theme was the pollution of rivers in the community. This echoes a broader concern in Ghanaian society in which the pollution of water bodies due to for instance informal mining practices are seen as a threat to the population and to the nation as such. This theme appeared strongly in the final version of the song, however not directly expressed. The phrase

'clean water is what we need' was a way to discretely or implicitly mention the concern about water pollution without engaging directly in political conversations. In a later workshop (April 2026, University of Copenhagen), the band was asked who the audience for the song was. They responded that they imagined the audience to be both ordinary citizens and decision makers, although the song did not contain an explicit political message. They related this to a practice in Ghanaian society in which comments on social issues and political critique are done through implicit lyrical language. Phrases in the song such as 'clean water is what we need' and 'Ghana Water, let the water flow' make reference to the fact that clean water is not available for all but should be provided for by the government, and that many perceive the irregularity of water provision from the public provider of water (Ghana Water Company Ltd.) a problem.



**Fig. 1.** Musicians doing fieldwork, Kumasi, Ghana. Here meeting an Assembly man, who was a musician in his youth.



**Fig. 2.** Music workshop in Kumasi, Ghana.



**Fig. 3.** Musician drinking borehole water during fieldwork in Kumasi, Ghana.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Art based methods are increasingly being used both in research and design (Leavy, 2020). Art serves as a way to communicate experiences and ideas in multimodal ways, but also as a way to create knowledge in experimental and collective ways. Co-creation has been highlighted as a way of working together across sectors and disciplines to ensure more participation across hierarchies, to generate innovative solutions and to level out power hierarchies. But what kind of knowledge does co-creating knowledge of water with music generate and how does that challenge how we think and what we know about water?

We argue that by exploring multiple epistemological perspectives through art, we can add important nuances to innovation and co-creation that draws in community participation and perspectives in the water policy field. A call for community participation does not always translate into pertinent policy measures because the languages and narrative registers are operating in parallel spheres. We argue that by drawing on music and creative processes, we can bring in knowledge that

resonates with more embedded ways of addressing community concerns that do not explicitly use political or policy language. This allows for sensitive questions to be addressed, but also for a more comprehensive understanding of what water means in the lives of people. This does not imply that knowledge created through music is not solution oriented. As mentioned above, the song writing workshop was framed as centring on water experiences and stories rather than problem-solving directly. This appeared to be an artificial division as the artists were capturing both everyday challenges, their possible solutions (such as building more boreholes) and the existential and cosmological meaning of water ('water is life'). Through this we learned that material, practical and cosmological meanings of water are closely intertwined.

A further question is what it requires to take knowledge into action and how we can move beyond the immediately relevant institutions and policy stakeholders and include innovative ways of sharing knowledge such as oral and non-written forms (from policy briefs to music).

Our experiment with music as method suggests a method that can engage in conversations and debates in different ways than conventional academic and policy research output. Most often ethnographic work ends up in academic journals or reports inaccessible to the subject communities. Music as method thus moves beyond the conventions of this academic punctuation and extends the conversation further to accommodate all interested parties: research and the scholarly community; researchers and the subject communities; musicians and fans/audiences. The scope of reach is widened, and the concerns raised a shared and communal experience and attention.

Additionally, studying the community through the lens of musicians (as community members) alleviates issues of spectatorship. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's (1970) notion of the operating writer, the musicians became part of the struggle being addressed and not simply reporters. They drew from their own experiences, and through this engaged with the experiences of others. Their shared concerns on the subject matter materialised in their individual lyrics, and the common thread that reflects communality and a sense of shared experience. This is important for how the community will approach solutions for their shared water challenges.

This exploratory method not only reports but also transcribes voices which normally would not fit for academic purposes and project them as viable for not only policy purposes but also for shared community conversations. 'Water is life' was a recurrent phrase during the workshop. This statement becomes radical when water is inaccessible, scarce and poorly managed. When communicated through music it also bears the ability and power to seep into social and cosmological crevices that other approaches do not. Returning to the question of what kind of knowledge can go into a song,

we have illustrated that every day and community knowledge become explicit in combination with an implicit policy register and spiritual knowledge.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The music video that was produced as part of this workshop is available on YouTube:

[https://youtu.be/zxCfBUjf-yY?si=f-aMT\\_0mi64hDGdr](https://youtu.be/zxCfBUjf-yY?si=f-aMT_0mi64hDGdr)

We have moreover produced a short documentary about the work process that is also available on YouTube: [https://youtu.be/NNViiJghgzI?si=tx2fD-VF-Kv\\_WtdA](https://youtu.be/NNViiJghgzI?si=tx2fD-VF-Kv_WtdA)

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None to declare.

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